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Disquieting signals south of the border

Is anyone listening to Reagan?

President Ronald Reagan has pulled out all the stops in his drive to bring popular pressure to bear on Congress to approve \$14 million in "covert" aid to the 15,000 guerrillas battling the Marxist Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The Contras' cause is just, the amount to be given is a pittance, and the cost of not assisting them is high. Nevertheless, it will take more than one eloquent presidential speech to induce Congress to cough up the money.

In a weekend radio address from his California ranch, Mr. Reagan called the Nicaraguan insurgents "our brothers" and compared them to such early "freedom fighters" as Simon Bolivar, the great Latin American liberator, and three European heroes of the American Revolutionary War, the Marquis de Lafayette, Baron von Steuben, and Thaddeus Kosciusko.

At the same time, Mr. Reagan made one of his strongest attacks on the Sandinistas, characterizing them as not "democrats but Communists, not lovers of freedom but of power, not builders of a peaceful nation but creators of a fortress Nicaragua that intends to export communism beyond its borders."

American aid originally was granted to the Contras — a loose alliance of former *Somozistas*, democrats and disaffected Indians — to enable them to interdict the supply lines running from Nicaragua to El Salvador. But increasingly it is becoming apparent the president is supporting them to weaken or overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. And more power to him.

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Every Contra is not a Jefferson, just as every Sandinista is not a devil. But the Contras pose no threat to Nicaragua's neighbors; the Sandinistas do. The Contras do not oppose America's Central American policies; the Sandinistas do.

If Nicaragua is permanently lost, El Salvador and Honduras will not be long behind. And if they go, Guatemala and Belize will be threatened. In the end, a Marxist Guatemala will bring pressure to bear on Mexico, the ultimate Soviet objective in the area.

What's more, a decision to cut off military aid to the Contras would demonstrate yet again that the United States is an unreliable ally, one that abandons its friends even before the going gets tough.

There are, of course, other ways to approach the problem. The U.S. could break relations with Managua, impose economic sanctions, recognize a Contra government-in-exile, and provide it with overt assistance. Or we could send in the Marines. But a Congress that balks at putting out \$14 million in overt assistance is unlikely to agree to any such escalation.

Down the scale, we could try to get private parties and third governments (such as the Israelis) to take over the responsibility for funding the insurgents. While this has worked to a degree in trying to bridge the gap until the \$14 million became available, it is not a viable solution over the long run: who wants to pull American chestnuts out of the fire when the United States doesn't care enough to do so itself?

That the Sandinistas are both firmly in the Communist camp and determined to export their revolution is hardly open to question. The Nicaraguan regime's most powerful leaders are dedicated Marxists. Since the overthrow of the Somozas in 1979, the Nicaraguan

army has ballooned from 10,000 to 119,000 men, by far the largest military force in the area.

The Nicaraguan army is equipped with 200 armored vehicles, 150 tanks and 44 helicopters, backed up by an estimated 10,000 members of the Russian, Cuban, East German, Bulgarian, Libyan, and Palestine Liberation Organization's forces. The Sandinistas also have links with Iranian and Italian terrorist groups.

Yet, as in Vietnam, the administration has not been successful in selling either the American people or the Congress on the realities of the situation, or in explaining the options to them. Many Americans do not even know which government we support (El Salvador) and which we oppose (Nicaragua).

The Nicaraguan insurgency is not the only one that the United States ought to be supporting.

Had Jonas Savimbi's pro-Western freedom fighters in Angola had even a modicum of American support for the past four years, the probability is that by now all of Africa would have been treated to the sight of the Russians and the Cubans clinging to the skids of their helicopters while evacuating Luanda. As it is, we've been involved in interminable negotiations that show every promise of leaving the Marxists in control of the Angolan government.

We have been giving considerable assistance to the Afghan guerrillas but not enough or of the right sort to enable them to really cut up the invading Russian army. The United States has given no significant assistance to rebel movements in Marxist Mozambique or Communist Ethiopia.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, America appears not yet to have learned it's better to pay a little now than a lot later.